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Transmedia in English Literature Classes: A Literature Review and Project Proposal

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This paper is the beginning of a research project which will explore the function and impact of Transmedia (TM) in Higher Education (specifically English Literature studies). There are several underlying assumptions that are being tested about the range of benefits to students of using this technology. These include: that TM deepens student understanding of the nature of creative expression (including literature); that TM deepens student engagement with the traditional literature they have been studying; that TM releases students' creative expression; that TM provides students with insights into the extraordinary creative power of digital technologies; that TM deepens students' sense of community (both within and beyond class).

Keywords: Transmedia, Blog, Vlog, Facebook, Pinterest, Engagement, English Literature

Background to this investigation

With a background of using Blogs and ePortfolios to create individual digital literature journals with peer interaction (using WordPress.com), ACU literature students have now been prompted to begin using Transmedia (as either Vlogs, Special FaceBook accounts, Pinterest, Cartoon Creation and other Web 2.0 tools) in two units during first semester 2013: Shakespeare and the Renaissance & Nineteenth Century Literature.

Sample topics used in two Literature Units: *Shakespeare and the Renaissance & Nineteenth Century Literature*

Sample transmedia tasks that have already been used in classes are provided below.

Shakespeare (3rd year unit): Write/Film a modernised "Transmedia" story in which Hal and Falstaff confront each other in Love and Hate. Within your group allocate roles and responsibilities. Along with these roles two people could work together as "Directors", two people could work together as technology scouts (i.e. researching what transmedia elements could be used in this joint presentation). Use each of your WordPress sites to set up components of the story with clear links from one site to the other. Two people could be set up as "Critics" and "Troubleshooters": your job to inspect how the story is going, how it is working.

Nineteenth Century (2nd year unit): Write/Film a modernised "Transmedia" story in which Charles Dickens, George Eliot (Mary Anne Evans), William and Dorothy Wordsworth meet at a dinner party to confront the question: "How can we help to make the lives of the generation who are now between 17 and 25 more rich and meaningful?" Use each of your WordPress sites to set up components of the story

with clear links from one site to the other. Two people could be set up as "Critics" and "Troubleshooters": your job to inspect how the story is going, how it is working.

This concise paper will present a Literature Review of Transmedia and will also outline a research study going forward.

Transmedia Literature Review

Transmedia is "a single experience that spans across multiple media" (Warren, Wakefield & Mills, 2013, p. 67). Lamb (2011) elaborates, defining transmedia storytelling as follows:

> "Transmedia storytelling involves a multimodal, multimedia story with nonlinear, participatory elements. Resources connected to the story might include print materials; documents; maps; web-based clues; mobile apps; cell phone calls; social media connections; activities and games; and media such as audio, video, or animation. The main storyline may or may not reside in one location, such as a traditional book or website." (p. 15)

The variety of media components utilised in transmedia approaches can be used to provide additional information, amplify the importance of minor characters in the main narrative, or even add new characters that were not a part of the original story (Pence, 2012). Transmedia environments also ask readers to seek out content, explore information in different contexts, evaluate ideas across formats, and interact with other readers (Lamb, 2011). They are are non-linear, deeply immersive, intersubjective, and require student evaluation of content (Warren, Wakefield & Mills, 2013). Many of these elements have emerged from our experience with recent student output.

Transmedia learning environments can enhance the learning process not only by creating an immersive and engaging learning environment, but also by building on the digital literacies of younger generations of students, providing a context for collaborative problem solving, and integrating seamlessly with emerging cloud computing resources (Pence, 2012). Transmedia approaches encourage student centred learning by actively challenging teachers to have students put what they see, hear, and read to use (Jenkins, 2010). Learners can control the exploration process and how they engage with the artefacts, and can also interactively evaluate ideas with other learners (Warren, Wakefield & Mills, 2013). Transmedia learning environments have been used in university contexts to encourage inquiry, critical thinking, problem solving, creativity, reflection, and critical discourses (Warren, Wakefield & Mills, 2013, p. 67). Again our current cohort of TM students reflect many of the elements described in this literature review.

Transmedia narratives have stemmed from the marketing field, where multiple modes of communication are used for promotional and engagement purposes. Askwith (2009) offers four principles to guide the use of transmedia, which resonate with learning and teaching:

1. Focus on creating a consistent and unified experience across all platforms
2. Let each platform do what it does best
3. Ensure each element works on its own terms but also adds something to the broader experience
4. Bring people together and give them something to do.

Fleming (2011) goes further to propose that for transmedia education projects it is important to:

- consider which media platforms best suit the needs of learners
- wherever possible extend the learning beyond the classroom into the broader community
- engage learners so that they are deeply immersed in the narrative
- if possible embed the learning in real-life settings.

Pence (2012) talks about two different poles of transmedia usage:

- Experience (or closed) transmedia: Various media platforms are used to create a unified experience for others.
- Framework (or open) transmedia: An existing set of resources is adapted by users to evolve a new vision of that world, where no single author (or group) has control.

These principals and observations have provided key ingredients to the strategies being employed in this Higher Education research project. Learning experiences have been constructed with many of these elements in mind, but there is an underlying key question that needs to be addressed when designing learning experiences: teachers need to consider the extent to which they design transmedia learning experiences as a stepwise narrative or allow them to be more 'rhizomatic', encouraging students to branch out following their own creative inclinations.

Transmedia approaches have already been used in several educational contexts. The inanimate Alice project (http://www.inanimatealice.com/about.html) introduced teachers and students to new media literacies (Pullinger & Joseph, 2011). Using a more closed transmedia approach Facebook was used to construct an adaption of Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (http://mashable.com/2011/04/25/shakespeare-facebook-cyber-bullying/ Ophelia Project, 2011) and *The Tempest* and Kafka's *The Trial* (*http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/transmedia-theater-projects-tell-the-stories-of-shakespeares-itempesti-and-kafkas-ithe-triali*).

Jenkins (2009) proposes that transmedia approaches also develop and (test) students 21st Century literacies including the abilities to:
- search for, remix, and distribute information across various media platforms
- manage, analyse, and synthesise multiple streams of information
- develop independent creations that are integrated as a whole, and
- represent multimodally (for instance through through images, text, audio and video).

Transmedia participants need to be accustomed with interactivity, networks, screen fragmentation, rapid presentation, rapid adaptation, intertextuality (where texts affect one another), and working across multiple screens (Scolari, cited in Pence, 2012). Teachers can support student performance on transmedia task by guiding media selection and other related transmedia processes (Jenkins, 2010). Much of this is borne out in our current work with ACU literature students.

In their Learning and Teaching as Communicative Actions (LTCA) framework Warren, Wakefield and Mills argue that Knowledge Construction occurs through an iterative process of ardent inquiry and communication actions (normative, strategic, constantive and dramaturgical) that lead to critical thinking. This can be used to guide transmedia learning design. It is principles such as these that underpin the kinds of exercise that we plan to use with students over the coming year.

THE IMPENDING STUDY

Based upon initial observations this year of new forms of learning resulting from transmedia approaches, a formal investigation of cause and effect mechanisms will commence next year. As well as examining the nature of these emergent epistemologies, the project team will analyse how the task design and pedagogical strategies influence learning. This will involve triangulating student work samples with student feedback data (surveys and interviews) and teacher observations to determine cause and effect mechanisms that enhance the learning process. We invite feedback and participation in the refinement of instruments and analytic techniques.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this short paper is to project into the future and explore the way that Transmedia could significantly alter the landscape of teaching in the humanities (with clear application to other areas). In line with Pence's observation our research is underpinned by the question: "If teachers fail to introduce some freedom to exercise creativity into courses, will conventional course presentations methods hold the attention of young people who have grown up with the Internet, transmedia, and alternate reality games?" (Pence, p.136). This approach is further born out in the following observation:

> "Aaron Smith points out that one of the major challenges facing television and motion picture producers is finding a way to cater to casual viewers while also providing an immersive environment for those who wish a full transmedia experience [5]. Will educators face a similar situation, trying to satisfy students who wish to become more involved in creating the course material while still serving those who wish to exert as little personal effort as possible?" (Pence p. 138-139)

Aaron Smith's comments are central to one of the key issues confronting educators and that is whether

the expressive freedom provided to today's students is sufficient to animate their creative interests. So it is an ongoing challenge to ensure that the new technologies are presented in such a way that they do become serious tools of learning while at the same time stimulating and sustaining a real interest in the academic area(s) they are operating within. As Lamb has argued:

> "Today, young people may choose from many different devices that serve a variety of functions. But does technology-based reading enhance or distract from the learning experience? The answer may depend on whether the media elements and technology tools are integral or incidental to the reading experience." (Lamb, p. 17)

So while we might be very excited by the new worlds of learning possibilities being opened by Transmedia tools, we need also, very much, to be clearly attuned to how these tools might best operate – to deepen learning, engagement, and enjoyment, within the framework of the units we currently teach. This is our challenge over the next 12 months.

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